DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 573 CS 510 545

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TITLE "Venting" in the Workplace: An Ethnographic Study among Resident Assistants.
PUB DATE 2001-02-00
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western States Communication Association (72nd, Coeur d'Alene, ID, February 23-27, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Ethnography; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Organizational Communication; Qualitative Research; *Resident Advisers; *Speech Acts
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Patterns; Hymes (Dell); Speech Community

ABSTRACT

The term "venting" has been used interchangeably with negatively-connotated words like "outburst," "bitching," "complaining," and with more functional words like "disclosing." A literature review of venting showed that researchers have approached the term from multiple perspectives. Because of the ambiguity of what venting is or is not, why it is done or not done, and whether or not there are benefits, a study sought to identify the patterns of communication that could be referred to as "venting" in a particular speech community--the workplace. The context for studying venting is a university residence hall, and the communication is between resident assistants or advisers (RAs), who live on the floor with other students and whose main duties are to foster an atmosphere for academic, social, cultural, and emotional growth in the residence. The majority of the data collected came from observations made in the back office of the workplace and extensive interviews with RAs. Ten formal, structured interviews were conducted along with twice as many informal interviews. Data were collected only when RAs vented to other RAs. Several of D. Hymes's "Speaking" components were used as a filter for observation. Past research on venting can be categorized into two viewpoints, the "container perspective" and the "control valve perspective." The importance of this study is that it helps bridge the two perspectives through observable and accounted data meaningful to participants. Findings suggest that venting has multiple ends and is not confined to either perspective, rather it has characteristics applicable to both views. (Contains 28 references.) (NKA)

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# "Venting" in the Workplace: An Ethnographic Study Among Resident Assistants.

by Brendon Burchard

CS 510 545

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"Venting" has become a broadly used term, and like many colloquialisms, has taken on nebulous meanings and conflicting connotations. Individuals have used venting interchangeably with negatively-connotated words like "outburst," "explosion," "bitching," "complaining," and less dramatic, more functional words like "disclosing," "alleviating," ar expressing."

We've all been in situations where someone enters a room and starts venting. Whatever we called it, we were aware that the person was talking about problems, feelings, events, etc. that were troubling them. In nearly every setting in our lives, we can probably recall a time when a person started telling us about their troubles. Sometimes we cared and listened, others we just wondered when they'd finish and why they brought their feelings up in the first place! Humor aside, whether we do it, or we hear it, venting is a regularly occurring event in our daily lives.

In a literature review of venting, it's apparent that researches have approached the term from multiple perspectives. Research has been divided into two basic perspectives based on a perception of the underlying metaphor. Though both camps view venting as a verbal outlet of distress, many differences are discernable.

One perspective has focused on the "container" metaphor which assumes that pressure builds and builds, and finally, *boom!* the pressure is released. This body of research, which will be called the "container perspective," views venting as a sort of "blowing off steam" and generally suggests it to be a poor way of managing distress because it is seen as uncontrolled or too intense (c.f., Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999; Planalp, 1999). A general view of venting, the assumption that it is uncontrolled, and how it can be viewed as a negative process for ourselves and others can be seen in the following:

> Rather than providing a healthy outlet for emotion, uncontrolled expression often provides an opportunity to practice and become expert at negative feelings and action. In addition, an unfortunate by-product of the 'explosion'

> part of the container metaphor is that damage to others is a possible and perhaps unavoidable consequence (if shrapnel hits a bystander). (Planalp, 1999, p. 107).

Individuals who vent are seen as "using energy to distract themselves that could better be spend dealing with the trauma" (107). Looking at venting this way "suggests that expression is a passive process that involves just 'letting out' distress" (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999; p. 6 ) rather than dealing with it. Thus, venting is not viewed as a helpful to the process of "dealing with" problems.

The other perspective perceives the underlying metaphor to resemble more of a control valve. Much like valves on large reactors, venting is a way of *controlling and managing* the pressures before excess buildup. The "control valve perspective" sees venting as less extreme and delayed. Further, it focuses on venting as a support-seeking strategy using *talk* to relieve distress and clarify issues in our lives. "The process of venting is a way to relieve internalized pressures but also to create through talk imagery that crystallizes somewhat unknown cognitions into known and shared entities" (Albrecht, 1987, p.33). The "control valve" metaphor focuses more on venting as a process of talking to "clarify unclear feelings, develop strategies for dealing with such problems, and begin the process of problem solving" (Albrecht & Bach, 1997, p. 91).Thus, venting is seen as more of a positive outlet of emotion that helps us define our reality and *is an integral part* of "dealing with our problems." Indeed, "expression of negative feelings is both a sign of distress and a possible means of coping with that distress" (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999, p. 26).

Additionally, whereas the first camp sees venting as a sort of monologue, this view emphasizes the interpersonal communicative properties of venting in that each person involved mutually influences one another.

This is not to say the "control valve perspective" sees no negative aspects to venting. As a matter of fact, both perspectives seem to understand venting can present self-presentation concerns which adversely affect the "ventor." Albrecht (1994, p. 429) found that "venting of negative emotion is often inhibited by social norms that condemn any display of such emotion or limit such displays to private settings." Burleson & Goldsmith (1998, p. 250) also found "disclosing a problem and expressing negative emotions threatens an individual's public identity as a competent and composed person." Because venting can be seen in this negative light, it is important for the ventor to perceive a supportive environment before he/she vents. "The willingness and ability to express and explore negative feelings will be enhanced if participants feel safe and secure about doing so" (263).

Regardless of the perspective/metaphor used, the question must be asked, "Why do individuals vent to others?" Why do we choose to disclose our distress, emotions, thoughts, and feelings? As Albrecht (1987; p.38) noted, "the search for meaning amidst uncertainty propels individuals to seek out others in verifying and constructing their personal interpretations." Thus, we often seek out others to help clarify issues in our lives and because "human contact can help provide beneficial outcomes in the face of life stress" (Albrecht, 1987, p. 26). Talking with others helps us to understand and organize our emotions through the logical and cognitive functions of conversation (Planalp, 1999; Clark, 1993; Rimé 1983), develops bonds and maintains close relationships (Rimé et. al, 1996; Leatham & Duck, 1990), and helps provide a sense of control (Planalp, 1999; Albrecht, 1987). Further, many researchers have found that communicating our emotions is beneficial to us and not communicating our feelings may have negative effects on us (Albrecht, 1994; Clark, 1993; Burleson, 1998; Rimé et. al, 1996). When

we talk about our troubles, a form of interpersonal coping processes begin (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 258). Thus, as a form of talking, venting serves several important functions.

Because of the ambiguity of what venting is or is not, why it's done or not done, and whether it benefits us or not, this study attempts to identify the patterns of communication we could refer to as "venting" in a particular speech community – the workplace. Speech communities have specific meanings, rules, and ways of speaking that varies from other communities and at the same time may give us insights to a larger social and cultural context (see Hymes, 1962). The benefit, then, of a qualitative study of this kind is its access to a very specific context which can be used as an illustration of broader communicative phenomena.

## CONTEXT

The context for studying venting takes place in a university residence hall, or dormitory, between residence hall assistants (commonly called "resident assistants," "resident advisors," or more simply, "RAs"). RAs are university students who live on the floor with other students and main duties are to foster an atmosphere for academic, social, cultural, and emotional growth in the residence hall.

RAs serve many functions to residents and the Residence Life Office. For residents, RAs are advisors who seek to give information regarding educational questions; counselors who seek to help with personal and interpersonal issues; mediators who seek to assist with interpersonal conflict (see Ross et al., 1997); enforcement agents who seek to prohibit state, local, and university policy violations; event and program coordinators who seek to provide entertainment and educational events; and referral agents to residents who seek to provide residents with appropriate contacts in and around the university area. For the Residence Life Office, RAs serve

as administrative support, desk attendants, and liaison between university administration and students. In this context, there are 11 RAs who each are responsible for an average of 40 students on each floor of the dormitory.

RAs were particularly great subjects. As employed university students, they are subject to many scheduling and academic pressures. They live in the same place where they work so their daily environment is a blended scene of personal and professional stresses. They must serve multiple, and conflicting, functions as counselors and disciplinarians to their peers. In other words, the lives of RAs are particularly stressful, and needless to say, they vent a great deal.

Each residence hall has two supervisors who, in addition to RA duties on their floors, directly supervise the RA staff. The supervisors have a high level of autonomy from the Residence Life Office and play a significant role in interviewing, hiring, training, and evaluating RAs. Most issues and problems within each dormitory are handled "in house" by the supervisors.

The majority of the data collected came from observations made in the back office of the workplace and extensive interviews with RAs. The back office is an informal meeting place for resident assistants (RAs) directly behind, and connected to, the front office where services are provided to residents. The front office is a few feet from the main entrance to the building and an area of high-traffic.

Only RAs, the secretary and select maintenance staff are allowed in the office. The back office is used primarily only by RAs. The back office has a couch which comfortably seats three, a lounge chair, a computer desk and chair, a refrigerator, bulletin boards with information and work schedules, and the RA's mailboxes. Because of all of these contents, RAs visit the back office frequently for occupational, social, and personal needs.

## METHODS

Information was collected in search of patterns of meanings and behaviors in order to better grasp what "venting" means, its semantics, and purposes in a specific speech community – Resident Assistants (RAs) at work. To aid in this end, an ethnography of speaking approach was taken in which I documented the talk used in venting, "noting not only that speech occurred or not, but also where, by, and with whom, in what language(s) or dialect(s), in which verbal forms, about which topics, as part of what interaction sequences, and with what observable consequences" (Philipsen, 1992, p. 7). Components of Hyme's (1972) SPEAKING mnemonic were used to help systematically study the content, style, and function of the speech act (Philipsen, 1977). The components of the mnemonic are scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre and will be elaborated on when discussing the particular findings of this study.

This descriptive framework provided the "lens" in which I viewed, collected, and coded data. Descriptive frameworks "provide the investigator with an empirically grounded understanding of what to look for when he tries to identify acts of speech in a particular episode, setting or community" (Philipsen, p. 46). For four months I gathered data as a participant observer while working, living, and socializing with RAs as their supervisor.

Collecting data as a supervisor to the participants involved presented possible challenges, and I attempted to minimize those challenges in every way possible. First, data was collected only when RAs vented to other RAs. If a RA vented to me, no data was collected. Second, understanding that many factors could affect interviewee responses, like a desire to please the interviewer, I stringently checked for implausibility, unreliability, and cross-checked informant's

accounts with accounts given by other informants (see Whyte, 1984). To my benefit, I had developed close, interpersonal friendships with each interviewee. As Whyte (1982, p. 115) found, "The confidence that develops in a relationship over a period of time is perhaps the best guarantee of sincerity."

I conducted ten formal, structured interviews and twice as many informal interviews which helped me further ascertain the relationships, semantics, purposes, and the "common knowledge" needed to participate in venting in this speech community. These interviews were particularly useful in discovering what could not be observed. Throughout the study, the words chosen by the interviewees are used in quotation marks to provide a better picture of what venting meant to the participants.

Because of the close work environment in which all RAs live in the same building, I had a plethora of situations to study: official and informal meetings; breakfast, lunch, and dinner get-togethers; discussions in RAs' rooms; and talk in the front and back office. The variety of organizational and informal residential settings allowed me to code data in two different categories – (1) venting in formal, traditional workplace environments (the office), and (2) venting in other, less formal settings surrounding the work environment (hallways, RA rooms, lunch rooms, etc.). For the scope of this study, I've chosen to focus on the former so as to better grasp the term "venting" in traditional organizational settings.

The following section uses "RAs" and "ventors" interchangeably for the purposes of clarity, analysis, and ultimately to connect the speech community to larger contexts of communication.

## FINDINGS

As discussed earlier, venting has become somewhat of an abstract term viewed by multiple perspectives. In an effort to set boundaries and categorize meanings for the term and its practice, several of Hyme's SPEAKING components were used as a filter for observation. Specifically, and most relevant to venting, the following categories were used: scene, topic, key, participants, act sequence, norms of interaction, and ends. This framework also provided the categories for inquiry while interviewing participants. Though different forms venting – and what will be called the "venting session" – inevitably presented themselves, this study seeks to provide a general account of venting from the data collected.

### SCENE

The setting in which venting takes place is extremely important. Place often dictated whether or not venting took place, to whom it is directed, or what depth of disclosure took place. "Levels of privacy"[1] were monitored before ventors spoke. That is, RAs reported that they would ascertain what chances they had of being interrupted or overheard before venting. If they felt like they would be interrupted before "getting it all out" regarding "the deep issues," they would often wait until a better time. At the same time, more "superficial" topics that were simply "annoying" were less likely to cause the ventor concern for privacy. A detailed comparison of "deep issues" vs. "superficial" issues is discussed in the following topics section.

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[1] As mentioned previously, the participants own words will be used throughout the study to provide insight to their realities, meanings, and interpretations.

Therefore, if a ventor felt that they could control the setting in terms of who entered, they were more likely to vent about "deep issues." These issues usually required more time and attention from listeners, so ventors were conscious of privacy and possible interruptions.

A ventor would often look around the corner of the back office to see who might hear what they were saying before continuing. When ventors paid little attention to who was around, they were often discussing situations/contexts in which the person they were talking about couldn't possibly be around, or concerns which didn't include people (i.e. tests, time constraints, etc.)

When ventors "just burst" and didn't pay attention to who was nearby, they would often finish venting and look around embarrassed to see who heard them. This seemed to happen when and event happened very recently because "sometimes you just can't hold it in."

Because the ventors being observed were in an organizational setting, they were conscious of whether or not coworkers, supervisors, residents, secretaries, etc. could hear them. In this effect, ventors would often speak with a hushed tone in the back office.

Due to these types of privacy issues, venting often moved to more controllable scenes than the office. "I don't really feel comfortable in the back or front office – back office, somewhat, but it's more personal rooms. I think the most comes out in rooms because you're not worried about thinking about the residents hearing, coworkers you might not want to hear, or the secretary hearing." Thus, place is inextricably tied to the control of participants.

**TOPIC**

As one RA put it, "Venting is just talking about something bothering us." It can be about emotions, events, contexts, ourselves, or other people that have in some way troubled us. Talk is

focused on some problem, not the solution to the problem. Once the topic moves to discussing solutions, participants are no longer venting; rather, they've begun problem solving. "Venting is the discussion of the problem before problem solving," a participant observed.

Because venting is not discussing solutions, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking is just "bitching," "complaining," or "griping." Rather, the topic of venting is also often about "clarifying issues" and "getting a different perspective." Ventors were not, and do not, operate in a vacuum in which they proceed to perform negative monologues. Like communication, venting is a transactional process between participants. The specific semantics of venting are discussed in the Act Sequence section later on; for now it's important to realize that venting focuses on more than just the problem, it focuses on creating, understanding, and framing that problem.

Further, it's important to note that venting has varying degrees of meaning, or importance, to the participants. Venting can be about issues "really bothering" ventors, or what are called "the big ones," or "deep issues." Conversely, venting can also involve issues/events that are simply "annoying," or what are called "superficial" or "day-to-day problems." This continuum from being "really bothered" to merely "annoyed" has great effect on the degree in which ventors disclose emotion, clarify feelings, seek support, and interact with the listener(s).

The ways in which ventors differentiate the levels of talk (i.e. "deep issues" vs. "superficial") is particularly important. Katriel and Philipsen (1981) similarly differentiated "communication" and "mere talk." In their analysis, they found that participants referred to "communication" as close, supportive, and flexible speech and "mere talk" was more distant, neutral, and rigid. For ventors, levels of talk about issues "really bothering them" – "deep issues" – are comparable to Katriel and Philipsen's "communication." Further, talk about "superficial" or "day-to-day problems" is comparable to the authors' "mere talk" in which they found the

content to be "everday chit-chat." These levels of talk, which seem to fit on a continuum, has dramatic effect on all aspects of venting and is apparent in the following sections.

The topics of venting could be categorized in three areas: event, feeling, and affect. These categories are by no means mutually exclusive; as a matter of fact they are often woven together so tightly venting would seem incomplete without one of them

*Event*

The topic of venting was generally focused on a past event/issue/concern. "Usually, something has bothered me and I go in and tell someone about it." That "something" was the topic of venting.

RAs vented about events that happened recently. "It's not often you go in and tell someone about something that was bothering you 20 days ago. It's usually two days ago, or two hours ago." Deep, long-held frustrations and problems were also vented about – though nearly always caused by a recent triggering event.

The events ventors discussed were often limited by, or chosen because of, the participants present. In this sense, ventors usually discussed events that the listeners could relate to. For example, because of their shared experience in work, RAs often limited their venting to work-related topics. RAs rarely vented about family or personal, unless their relationship with the other RA was "close." The specific relational issues important in venting is discussed in the participants section below.

While discussing the event, or what is "bothering" them, ventors often justified their actions. For example, while discussing how he handled an intoxicated resident, and RA said, "If I didn't call campus security I wouldn't have been fair to the residents who would have to deal

with his drunk ass." Ventors would commonly use phrases like, "I had to . . .," or "There was nothing else I could do . . ."

Further, when discussing an event, RAs also framed the event as a "me against them" dilemma. That is, most topics focused on how the ventor was inconvenienced, treated unfairly, etc. by another person/organization. "It's like they're always trying to piss me off," one participant exclaimed.

*Feeling*

Venting is also, and maybe most importantly, about feelings. Ventors discussed how they felt during and after a situation. At no time in observations or during interviews did a participant not relate how they felt about a situation they were venting about.

The topic of ventors' discussions were their feelings. That is, they would talk about the "something" bothering them, then tell the listener how they felt while experiencing that situation. A participant recounted this story:

> She [a resident] kept telling me about her problems with her boyfriend. We were up 'till four in the morning talking. She kept crying and I was really pretending to listen and I kept telling her it was all o.k. But the whole time I kept thinking, "God, I just want her to shut up so I can go to bed."

Ventors also told the listener(s) how they felt in the present about the situation: "I feel cheated," "disrespected," "not heard," "pissed off." Thus venting is not simply just recounting "something" bothering us, it is disclosing feelings about that "something."

The feelings disclosed in venting were often of anger, disappointment, anxiety, and overwhelm. Because venting is "about something bothering us," one is not surprised that the feelings disclosed are not positive, "feel-good" emotions.

*Affect*

Further, the topic focused on how that "something" has *affected* the ventors life: "this is gonna make my day long," "I was up for hours thinking about it," "I don't think I can talk to her anymore." This is not to say that ventors always knew how the "something bothering" them would affect their lives. Rather, ventors often searched for consequences as they were speaking: "I just don't know if I can walk by that room again," "I don't know if I'll be able to handle it."

The topics which seemed to affect ventors' lives, and thus caused them to talk about that affect, were usually the "deep issues." It would be odd to hear a ventor talk about "superficial" or "day-to-day problems" dramatically affecting their lives. Again, these types of problems were usually more "annoying" than something that "really bothered" ventors.

**KEY**

The tonality of venting was dictated by the "depth" of the importance and meaning of what was "bothering" the ventor. Ventors would use tones and language that was more "frustrated," "upset," "overwhelmed" when discussing "deep issues." They sounded genuinely "bothered" and would discuss the affects on their lives more often when using this tonality.

When talking about "day-to-day problems," ventors would just sound "a little high strung" and more "like they were just relating an unbelievable story." Humorous and "light-hearted" tones were more often used than serious and deeply concerned tones.

The language and tonality of venting can be understood using a continuum. On one end, a type of venting called "intense venting" can be characterized by tonalities and language that sound "more bothered," "frustrated," or "upset." On the other end of the continuum, "just

talking" can be characterized by tonalities and language "more relaxed," "carefree," or "sort of concerned."

**PARTICIPANTS**

Nothing impacts venting more in terms of topics discussed, tonalities and language used, semantics followed, or lengths of the "sessions" than the participants who are involved and their relationships. This section provides insight into the types of relationships that characterized types of venting. Most important to ventors, this section specifically discusses "the comfort factor" and how it could be evaluated and achieved by knowing the listener(s) was "understanding."

The central issue in participant relationships which affected venting was the "comfort factor," which was the general degree of comfort the ventor felt with the listener(s). "I always take the comfort factor into consideration before I really vent to someone." The umbrella term used to describe and create the "comfort factor" was "understanding." If ventors felt high levels of understanding in their relationship with the listener(s) – and thus have the comfort factor satisfied – they were more likely to vent to that person often, talk about "deep issues," use "intense venting," and move from venting to problem solving.

Since the "comfort factor" is made by levels of understanding, it's important to realize what exactly "understanding" meant to ventors. "Understanding" was made up of two components, "similarity" and "closeness." Participants spoke of similarity in terms of job tasks, personality, personal values and backgrounds.

"One benefit of having coworkers is you know exactly that they're going through the same thing, that they do the same job everyday. It's easy [venting] with people you work with because they know where you're coming from, they can identify with you." By virtue of similar

job tasks, then, coworkers were deemed "understanding." Participants actually reported preferring to vent about work-related issues to coworkers than close friends or family.

> Yeah, I could talk to friends and family about work stuff, but coworkers are different. It's like there is, I don't know, a local intelligence, where everyone at work understands better what I'm venting about and gives me better feedback and support cause they've been there.

Of course, job tasks weren't the only similarities ventors looked for. As mentioned previously, similar personality, personal values and backgrounds, and life experiences were valued. These types of similarities were not detectable in observations. Only through interviews did I come to discover the importance of these types of similarities and their affects on venting. Non-work related similarities like personal values and life experiences were shared by participants who regularly vented about things that "really bothered" them because they knew these types of similarities "really helped the person listening understand."

Further, listeners didn't need to have had a similar experience than what the ventor was discussing, though it helped. "It's not necessarily similarity in that area [I'm venting about], just similarity all around." Another participant responded, "I can see a little bit of my personality in all you guys [some coworkers], and then there's people I don't see similarities with that wouldn't understand a word I'm saying, and I wouldn't understand a word they're saying." Thus "similarity" had many dimensions and was a vital part to judging whether or not the listener(s) was "understanding."

"Closeness" is the other term used to define "understanding" and the most important influencing factor on venting that can be studied. While similarity was important, "closeness" was a larger indicator and influencer of whether or not ventors could be satisfied that the listener(s) was "understanding." If the ventor shared a close, multiplex interpersonal relationship

with the listener(s), they "knew for sure that the person was understanding." Close relationships in organizations break the boundaries of "coworkers" and enter the fields of "friendships." "Close friends are the ones I'll sit down and tell, 'Hey, I had a tough night last night.'"

The likelihood of ventors to talk about the "deep issues" that "really bothered" them hinged upon whether or not their was "closeness" in the ventor/listener(s) relationship. Ventors will more often just "blow off steam" to people they "don't feel that close to," but tend to ask questions, clarify problems, and move to problem solving with those that share a "closeness" with them. "I wouldn't go off on [coworkers who are not close] because I don't think they understand, they don't know what kind of person I am." Again, "closeness" in inextricably tied to "understanding."

Concerns of identity and impression management were also tied to closeness. Ventors reported being hesitant to speak of certain topics to those they were not "close" to.

> People you're close with just know you better. Like some people know better the way you react to things than other people. Some people know you're serious or mad about something, other people will just think you're losing your head, or not controlling your emotions like you should.

The concern about appearing "level-headed" rather than "crazy or out of control" was dominant in interviews, and always tied to a conversation of the types of relationships participants had. "When you're venting with someone your close to, you don't have to worry what you look like to them, because they understand what you're going through, and they understand you."

In sum, "similarity" and "closeness" composed the meaning of "understanding" to the participants of this study. The degree to which ventors felt the listener(s) was "understanding" had dramatic implications on their talk.

## ACT SEQUENCE

Thus far, venting has been explored as though it existed in a vacuum and was void of interaction. It's been studied as an isolated speech act to discover the patterns of topic, key, scene, and participants. Venting is much more than a ventor merely "blowing off steam" towards a passive listener/audience. As mentioned previously, venting is a transactional communicative event between participants. Both ventors and the listener(s) shape the course and content of venting. Thus, I will turn from addressing the speech act of the ventor called "venting" to the interaction called the "venting session."

A venting session is the broader conversational frame in which venting occurs. Venting sessions don't just happen chaotically, rather they have distinguishable semantic characteristics. In other words, sessions are structured – they have beginnings and ends which are somewhat predictable. The stages of a venting session begins with (1) *initiation*; moves through (2) *acknowledgement*, (3) *the venting account*, and (4) *validation*; and concludes with (5) *movement*.

### *Initiation*

Venting sessions began in one of two ways. In the *direct initiative approach*, the ventor verbally began the session. In the *indirect initiative approach*, the listener(s), as the audience of the ventor has been called to this point, recognized that something is "bothering" the would-be ventor and began the session. Common to both approaches is that the ventor, or would-be ventor, just entered the room.

The *direct initiative approach* usually begins with a statement intended to lead into a story. The statements are generally brief and vague – they "pull in" the listener(s) and lets them

know the ventor has a story to tell. For example, it was common for an RA to walk into the back office where another RA(s) is and say, "You wouldn't believe what happened last night." This statement grabs the attention of the listener and the session begins. Other common direct initiative comments included:

"What a long day . . ."
"Oh, man . . ."
"I'm so pissed . . ."
"You'll never even guess . . ."
"I just can't believe . . ."

When RAs began sessions with the directive approach, it was nearly always immediately upon entering the back office. There was rarely "small talk" involved. Though it was observed, entering a room and beginning venting after some delay was rare. When it did happen, it was usually a "day-to-day" or "superficial" issue that was more "annoying" than "important" that seemed to be suddenly remembered. For example, two RAs were in the front office for nearly ten minutes together and one RA suddenly said, "Oh, I can't believe I almost forgot. Get this, my stupid professor . . ."

The *indirect initiative approach* is more focused on the would-be audience/listener(s) initiating the session. More nonverbally cued, a listener(s) will notice something "bothering" the would-be ventor and ask "what's wrong?" Much of the nonverbal cues that the listener(s) pick up are comparable to states of depression, anger, or overwhelm. For example, an RA entered the back office and through her backpack on the couch, grabbed her mail from her box, and crumpled into a chair. The other RA in the room asked, "What's up?" and the session began.

This approach more commonly has participants in one another's presence longer before the session begins than the direct initiative approach. For example, three RAs were in the back office and one was particularly quiet. One RA pointed at the quiet RA and gave a look of

concern to the other. He then asked the quiet RA, "Hey, you alright? You're pretty quiet." The quiet RA then began venting. A "bothered" behavior of an RA, as opposed "to the normal way they act," was the cue the listener(s) always seemed to notice before asking a question which began the session.

*Acknowledgment*

If the direct initiative approach was used; the listener(s) in some way, verbally and/or nonverbally, gives the indication that he/she is "interested." Whether stopping what one is doing, verbally expressing interest, or giving eye contact, the listener(s) begins to "pay attention" to the ventor. If the indirect approach was used, the listener(s) has asked a question, or nonverbally indicated concern.

*The Venting Account*

Regardless of the initiative approach, what happens next is what has been discussed thus far – venting. The ventor discusses what's "bothering them." This is usually done in the form of a story, an account of "what happened." As discussed earlier, the ventor generally recounts the event/issue/concern, how they feel about it, and how it may or may not affect their lives.

As the ventor expresses what's bothering them, it's very common for the listener to interrupt and ask for clarification, offer sympathetic/supportive comments or gestures, and/or offer exclamative remarks like, "Really?!," "No way!," "You're kidding me." These types of interruptions seem "appropriate" and are the norm. In general, they don't divert the ventor from finishing the story.

*Validation*

In addition to the interruptions just discussed, the listener(s) also validates the ventor's concerns/feelings. Whether acknowledging and validating decisions, feelings, concerns, or judgments, the listener(s) would often give positive feedback to comfort/acknowledge/support the ventor. "You know what they're going through, and you know what needs to be said to you when you're going through it, so you just say it to them and you try to console them, or make them have a better day, make them smile."

Listener(s) validations were often short comments like these:
"You did the right thing."
"You should feel that way."
"I'd be upset too."
"You're right, sounds like he's a real jerk."
"You'll be alright."

During this phase, the listener(s) occasionally sought to "put the problem in perspective." That is, the listener(s) tried to "lessen how big a deal the problem" was. Comments like "You've been through worse," "You can handle this," or "It's not that big of deal" addressed and responded to the ventor's concerns in a way that sought to help the ventor through the problem. Making jokes, pointing fun at the situation, and teasing were often tactics used to help the ventor get a perspective of the problem and realize it's not "life-threatening or anything."

In this sense, validations seemed like a way to make the ventor feel better. "Because that's the most important part, if you can break the mood they're in right now, make 'em smile, make 'em laugh, make 'em have some fun . . . then it's not going to matter so much anymore." This isn't to say the listener discounted the ventor's concerns, rather it was a way "to help the ventor get a hold of things."

Along these lines, and depending on the "depth" of the issue, listener(s) will often relate a similar event/story to the ventor during the validation phase. If the ventor is "really bothered,"

discussing a "deep issue," and using tonality and language of "intense venting," then the listener was less likely to offer a similar experience. On the other hand, if the ventor seemed more "annoyed," discussed a "superficial" or "day-to-day problem," and seemed to use tonalities associated more with "just talking," the listener(s) very often offered a similar experience. Round-robins are an important part of venting sessions. "If someone has gone through what you have, and they tell you about it, it lets you know they understand you." Round-robins are ways that listener(s) validate ventor's concerns by saying, "Hey, I've been through that too" and "you can get through this."

If the listener(s) did recount a similar experience during the validation stage, the session would nearly always "snap-back" to the ventor's event/concern. This was usually a dramatic, quick, reference back to the ventor's issue. For example, an RA began venting about having to deal with an emotional resident who was having relationship troubles and mid-way through discussing the details, the other RA present said, "Oh, yeah, that always happens. Last week . . ." After the RA finished the short story, she paused and said to the ventor, "So what did you end up doing?" The round-robin had taken place, and now the listener snapped-back to the ventor's concern.

In sum, validation can take many forms and several tactics are used by the listener(s). The act sequence of a venting session could not be played out without the listener(s) validating the ventor's concerns. "If a person doesn't seem to confirm some of the stuff I'm talking about, then they just don't understand me and there's no point even continuing."

*Movement*

The last stage in the venting session is called *movement* because the session usually moves to (1) "talking about the problem more," and/or then (2) to termination of venting as the participants move into problem solving, or the subject is changed.

If the ventor was talking about "deep issues" then the *movement* stage nearly always included a further clarification and discussion of the problem. The listener(s) would gather as much information as possible about the ventor's concern. Conversely, if the ventor discussed "day-to-day problems" then the listener(s) rarely asked for more information.

To whatever degree the problem is further discussed, once it has been the venting session ends. This happens for several reasons. As discussed earlier, once participants begin problem solving, they are no longer venting; problem-solving is the most common reason for sessions to end. "Deep issues" usually moved into "real" problem solving. That is, participants would spend some time formulating what to do, if anything, about the ventor's concern. "Superficial" and "day-to-day problems" were also problem-solved, but more so in a quick, matter-of-fact way that didn't approach the problem from "all-sides."

Problem solving wasn't the only way sessions ended. In fact, venting regularly did not move to problem solving at all. Often, usually with "superficial" issues, the session ended with a simple validation statement from the listener. For example, an RA would often vent about a problem, and the listener(s) would simply say, "That sucks," "Sorry to hear that," "That's the way it goes," or "That happens," and the session would end.

An important area of study in the termination of venting sessions are interruptions. As discussed earlier, ventor's are very conscious of the participants involved. If another person

entered a venting session, three things commonly happened: the session was postponed or dropped, the person was included, or the session continued with little regard to the person.

The topics and levels of closeness of the participants were the prime indicator of what happened to the session when there was an interruption. If a "deep issue" was being discussed and a person entered who was "close," they would often be "filled-in" and the session would continue. If the person was not "close," the session would be postponed until the person left or dropped until much later. "Day-to-day problems" being discussed would rarely be postponed or dropped if someone entered, rather the ventor would "just keep talking."

**NORM OF INTERACTION**

The norms of interaction revolved around *expectancy*. RAs were expected to vent, and the audience was expected to acknowledge, listen, and validate. In this sense, rules of interaction were present in RA venting sessions. "A rule is a prescription, for how to act, under specified conditions, which has (some degree of) force in a particular social group" (Philipsen, 1992, p.8). RAs were expected to vent, if they did not, they were questioned as to "what's wrong." The audience, or the listener(s), were expected to pay attention and "help out in any way they could." If they did not, the venting session would end. For the listener(s), these implicit expectations were so dominant that if not followed, the ventor would view him/her as "just adding to the whole problem."

If it could be said, then, that there was a Rule of Expectancy, it could also say there was a Rule of Sequence. If a after the venting act a ventor did not receive some form of validation they would be offended. In this sense, venting, like speaking is distinctive (see Philipsen, 1992). RAs as a speech community had preferences to the way in which venting sessions were to take place.

If an outsider failed to have knowledge of the necessity to validate ventors' concerns, he/she could not be an effective participant in the venting session.

Because of the Rule of Expectancy and Sequence, and the RAs knowledge of them, RAs formed a tight-knit group with a common communal identification. In other words, RAs were inextricably tied together or linked because of their common understanding and use of a particular communicative act.

**ENDS/PURPOSES**

Through observations and interviews it was readily apparent that venting serves several functions beyond just "blowing off steam." In fact, it's useful to see the ends/purposes on a continuum, from "blowing off steam" to "beginning problem solving." RAs reported that they vented for a myriad of reasons, all of which fell under the pedestal phrase, "talking helps." Specifically, they reported venting's purposes were (1) *Externalizing*; "To Get it Out There," (2) *Understanding*; "To Get a Grasp of Things," (3) *Intrapersonal Functions*; "To Feel Better," and (4) *Interpersonal Functions*; "To Bring Us Together."

"To Get It Out There"

Venting is primarily a process of externalizing, through talk, problems and concerns in our lives. When RAs were venting, they weren't necessarily seeking advice, or a solution to a problem. "It's just to externalize what's internal. To see what someone else might say about it, but maybe not to get an opinion or anything, but just to get it out there." This end is what people usually call "blowing off steam" because it rarely seeks to do anything more than to "get it off the chest."

But getting problems "out there" serves several more functions, as is apparent in the other following ends.

"To Get A Grasp of Things"

Venting helped participants understand, clarify, and order their thoughts and feelings. One participant summed up this idea:

> I think it's just good to hear yourself talk about it. It's good just to express it in words because sometimes things are in your head that aren't quite ordered. I don't know, it's hard to understand things even if it's something that happened to you. If you tend to talk about it you tend to find, I don't know, not an answer, but some order. You can better understand a situation and how you can better react to it.

To just "talk about it" is not the only way in which ventors "get a grasp of things." As discussed earlier, the ventor does not exist in a vacuum. He/she is not just merely providing a monologue that suddenly and magically sorts things for them. It is through the interaction with the listener(s) that the ventor is really helped. The feedback, validation, and clarification ventor's receive from the listener(s) is the primary source of gaining perspective and order. "Venting to someone helps me get a different perspective, a different outlook on the problem so I can get what's going on."

"To Feel Better"

By getting things that are "bothering" them "out there," and through their talk and interaction with others getting a better "grasp of things," ventors reported *feeling* better.

> Talking with people usually makes you feel better, especially because you're already at war inside you, because you're pissed off, or you've had a bad day. So you can't exactly work it out by staying internal with it. Talking to others just helps make me feel like I'm back in control because they usually help me deal with it and then I feel better.

"To Bring Us Together"

Ventors don't discuss their problems with others simply to use them as a sounding board or way to get clarification, they also do it to relate with them. Particularly because RAs have similar tasks, sharing job-related concerns and issues helps broaden the "local intelligence." Venting serves as a way for participants to create shared identities by talking about common concerns.

> Every time I vent to someone, they understand me that much more, and I understand them. We're closer than we were before. It's really a way to relate with others, to become closer and better understand what we all go through.

Much as Philipsen found in Teamsterville, "much of speech behavior functions, not primarily to report or to describe, but to link – that is, to link interlocutors in a social relationship, to affirm and signify the interlocutor's sameness and unity" (1992, p.11).

## DISCUSSION

As reviewed at the beginning of this study, past research on venting can be categorized into two viewpoints, the "container perspective" and the "control valve perspective." Though both perspectives would seem to agree that venting is "talking about something bothering us," each views sees the impact of doing so in different lights. The "container perspective" seems to view venting as primarily unhealthy because it is uncontrollable and takes energy away from dealing with the problem (c.f., Planalp, 1999). The "control valve perspective" perceives venting to be a way to control and manage pressure in which talking about problems relieves internal pressures and helps us better understand our problems (c.f., Albrecht, 1987). The benefit of understanding both perspectives is that it's readily apparent that venting has its pros and cons. The importance of this study is that it helps bridge the two perspectives through observable and accounted data

meaningful to participants. This study has shown that venting has multiple ends and is not confinable to either perspective, rather it has characteristics applicable to both views.

Most importantly, this study has shown that venting is not confined merely to a "container" view in which a ventor "blows off steam" in the direction of a passive audience. Like all communicative acts, the interaction of the participants shapes, creates, defines, regulates, and structures their communication. By addressing the fact that venting takes place within a larger interactional context, i.e. the venting session, this study reminds us that communication does not occur in a vacuum; and when researching any communicative phenomena it is vital we consider the larger environment (system) in which communication occurs.

Additionally, this study provides an insight into the fundamental topics, semantics, and purposes of venting. To this point, little research has attempted to take such a descriptive approach to defining and understanding venting. The data provided in this study will possibly aid future scholars in providing enhanced descriptions of venting before conducting their analysis and making their interpretations.

An integral part of ethnographic communication theory stresses the importance of comparative study (see Carbaugh, 1995). In this sense, the propositions, categories, claims, and assumptions made from this study need to be extended, tested, and reviewed in other contexts. Future research could address many questions. Are venting sessions outside of the workplace structured similarly? To what degree is the content of venting similar in organizations as compared to personal settings? What power dimensions in organizational settings (i.e. superior-subordinate relationships, and low-power vs. high-power) can and do affect venting and in what ways? What further effects does venting have on ventors? What are the affects on the listener(s)?

Can venting go to far, and what happens if it does? What can organizations do to manage venting and address ventor concerns?

Particularly relevant issues from this study could also be pursued in more detail: the "local intelligence" of coworkers, the interruptions in venting acts, the outline of the act sequence of the venting session, the discussion of "deep issues" vs. "day-to-day problems," the use of tone in "intense venting" vs. "just talking," etc.

This study sought to research venting of a specific community, RAs in the workplace, in order to draw a larger picture of communication in the workplace. Since communication socially positions persons and creates relations among them (see Carbaugh, 1995, p. 275), it's vital that researches continue to study all forms of talk that occurs in the workplace.

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